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Zenner '12 Gives Back to the Community

Summary: Keni Zenner '12 works with Morris schools to improve Latino students' literacy.

(January 27, 2014)-Earlier this year the University of Minnesota, Morris Office of Community Engagement, in partnership with area schools and the organization Lazos, applied for a grant to host a full-time AmeriCorps VISTA member, a post that uses indirect service to make sustainable changes in an underserved community. This position, sponsored by the Minnesota Literacy Council, was created specifically to foster and expand pre-K–12 programs to serve the growing Latino population. Morris alumna Keni Zenner '12 was selected to fill the new role, and she is already strengthening ties within the community.

Zenner got involved with the Latino community as an undergraduate, volunteering as a lead teacher in the Morris Area Community Education's English as a Second Language (ESL) program and participating in community organizations like Lazos and Jane Addams, which create ties between Latino immigrants and the broader community. After graduating, she joined the Minnesota Reading Corps and worked as a literacy tutor for preschool children. Both the aim of the new VISTA position and the chance to revisit the relationships she made during her time in Morris enticed her to apply.

"I had become really attached to the Latino community in Morris, and I wanted to continue that," says Zenner.

Zenner is working with local education settings to create a community needs and assets assessment with the help of research being done by Oscar Baldelomar, assistant professor of psychology, Cristina Ortiz, assistant professor of anthropology, and six of Ortiz's students. Her job also involves supporting the ESL Tutoring, Reading, Empowering Children (TREC) literacy program, which takes place during adult ESL classes and the Support and Friendship Group for Latino women. Zenner aims to foster literacy and learning, and already her efforts have improved the program. She implemented a new enrollment system and enhanced training for the tutors that allows them to offer better academic help.

These improvements have not gone unnoticed. In late December, Zenner received the Thomas B. McRoberts Morris Human Rights Award for her efforts. The award was established by the Morris Human Rights Commission to honor individuals who have shown a strong commitment for human rights in a local setting.

VISTA is the national service program designed specifically to fight poverty. Authorized in 1964 and founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs in 1993. Additional information is available at nationalservice.gov.

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